

### **Editorial: Kingsport fire chief aims to prevent tragedies (*Kingsport Times-News*)**

Hats off to Kingsport Fire Chief Charlie White, who is seeking to re-establish a position cut from the department three years ago. White hopes to reinvigorate a comprehensive residential fire safety campaign with the aid of a \$173,300 federal grant, 10 percent of which is required to be matched by local funds.

The three-pronged strategy, White says, consists of a smoke detector campaign, which the department is already aggressively pursuing, public safety announcements, and training and public education.

The Kingsport Board of Mayor and Aldermen has passed a formal resolution that will allow the KFD to initiate the application process.

Of the total grant amount sought, \$40,000 is earmarked for a public education officer's salary and benefits for one year. White says the position will be re-evaluated after a year to determine if future funding will be available. The grant will also pay for a laptop computer for safety fair presentations and data storage, a \$40,000 fire safety trailer that will be a working model of a home to demonstrate fire safety issues, a \$10,500 fire safety house model that will teach people how to recognize fire hazards, and a \$7,500 fire truck robot to use as an interactive teaching tool.

Those are just a few of the higher-ticket items the grant covers. Other items include smoke detectors, batteries, fire slogan pencils and erasers, fire safety brochures, a 911 simulator, a set of replacement fire character puppets, fire safety coloring books and other teaching tools.

As White observed, for \$17,000, the city is getting tenfold for what it's giving.

The lion's share of the grant, White says, will go towards public education, a particularly wise investment. "We have to overcome that myth in our city that (a fire) can't happen to me," White says.

Annually, two to three people lose their lives in city fires. And statewide, the toll is considerably higher - an average of 133 deaths each year. In fact, according to a recent study by the National Fire Protection Association, Tennessee has the second-highest fire fatality rate per capita in the United States, surpassed only by Mississippi.

Why do so many Tennesseans die in fires? The answers dovetail with the focus on fire education White hopes to bring to Kingsport.

The National Fire Protection Association found that states with high rates of fire fatalities such as ours share common characteristics. According to the NFPA report, the "highest fire death rates were in states with a higher proportion of adults who lack a high school education, who smoke or who are poor."

The main problem, it would seem, is how to educate those members of the public most at risk. That's where Kingsport's federal fire grant will help.

A good example of how such education programs work can be seen in nearby South Carolina.

According to the NFPA, South Carolina had the nation's highest fire death rate in the late 1980s. Then it introduced a statewide fire safety program that emphasized smoke-alarm installation and fire safety education. By 1991, the state's rank had dropped to No. 6. Right after the program lost its funding, the death rate went up again, and by 1993, South Carolina had the nation's second-highest fire death rate. The program has since been restored and the deaths there are, once again, on the decline.

The experience in South Carolina demonstrates two, related facts that White obviously understands: fire deaths can be prevented, and a high fire fatality rate is not inevitable.

According to NFPA studies and other national statistics, four of every five fire deaths occur in the home. Obviously, many of these deaths can be prevented if there are working smoke alarms on every level of the home and outside all sleeping areas.

Additionally, every household should draw up and practice a home fire escape plan that includes two ways out of each room, unobstructed and easy-to-use exits, a meeting place outside, and a posted emergency number for the fire department.

Fire safety experts say the simple act of changing smoke alarm batteries once a year cuts the risk of dying in a home fire nearly in half. A working smoke detector provides an early warning and critical extra seconds to escape. That's especially important in nighttime fires. The peak time for fire fatalities is between 2 a.m. and 5 a.m., when most are sleeping.